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**An examination of year one and year two students' understanding
of the spatial, gestural and visual design elements of their 2D
artwork
Sonya Fox**

Abstract

This paper examines young children's understandings of multimodal design elements made noticeable through the analyses of their 2D artwork, focusing on gestural, spatial and visual design, as described by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) as a meaning making system. It is argued that children already utilise accumulated multiple literacies gained from their intensely involved multimodal textual practices outside school experiences and sociocultural practices. This paper also explores how meaning making is becoming increasingly multimodal, with modes such as visual, spatial, audio, linguistic and gestural, due to the continual reshaping of language by new forms of communication media. These design elements are not separate entities, but are themselves interconnected with one another through semiosis and symbols. The paper also describes how "drawings of a developing child are symbolic in nature and form a part of the maturing ability to think symbolically" (Thwaites, 1999, p.6), or more specifically, that children use their artwork as a meaning making mechanism.

Introduction

What have you drawn here? What is your picture about? When asked to describe a piece of artwork they have produced, young children reply to these questions with eagerness and enthusiasm, and a variety of understandings of the design elements that frame their work. Children's drawings have long been known as the way children 'draw speech' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.115) and a major part of beginning 'literacy practices' within early childhood classrooms (Dyson, 2003). What has changed is the new direction these 'literacy practices' are taking.

Even though our understanding of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century has expanded well beyond the view that literacy is based on the ability to read and write (Bean, 2001; Unsworth, 2001; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Richards & McKenna, 2003), the mandated focus on standardised 'literacy' testing that privileges print based text may mean that teachers spend less time working with

children to explore the full complement of their funds of knowledge and multi-modal design meaning-making strategies already in their 'virtual school bags'. Thomson (2003), drawing on her own experience, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', metaphorically describes 'virtual school bags' as being full of things that students have already learnt from friends, home and the wider world experiences. She argues how some schools allow children to unpack and make use of what lies within their bags when they attend school, while other students' 'virtual school bags' are deemed unusable and unmistakably invisible. Henderson (2004) also believes that the funds of knowledge children bring to school can often become invisible within the classroom if teachers are not aware of them. Unsworth (2001, p.1) has stated that much professional literature has acknowledged how children are intensely involved in multimodal textual practices outside their school experience, and yet are rarely recognised as part of school literacies. As such, children's artwork can often go undetected as elements of multimodal design and as a process for making meaning.

As we have entered the new millennium, "our society is marked by the effects of globalisation and the ever-changing diversity of culture and language", as well as multimedia and information technologies, therefore changing the way in which we exchange and create meaning (Kalantzis et al, 2002, p.2). Due to these effects, literacy has demanded to be seen in many different ways (Gee, 2000) with additional modes of communication becoming prominent (Kress, 2000). Meaning-making has become increasingly multimodal, as with the case of children's drawings. Written-linguistic modes of meaning have become interrelated with visual, spatial, audio, gestural patterns of meaning, due to the continual reshaping by new forms of communication media (Kalantzis et al, 2002; Love, 2004), and where words can evoke visual images, audio and gestural patterns within our minds (Thwaites, 1999). These design elements are not separate entities, but are themselves interconnected with one another, as "all meaning-making is multi-modal. All written text is also a process of visual design" as explained by the New London Group (2000, p.29).

One of the most prominent forms of communication to emerge within contemporary society as a social practice is visual communication (Kress, 2000; Bamford, 2003; Unsworth, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). Visual language is a language of

imagination. It includes gestures, objects, signs and symbols and is defined as the ability to understand and produce visual messages with the “capacity to communicate instantly and universally” (Bamford, 2003, p.2). Acquired visual literacy skills are becoming increasingly important with the ever-expanding mass media in society, as more and more information and entertainment is accessed through non-print media, such as television, movies, advertisements and the internet (Twenty-first Century Literacies, 2002, p.1). Therefore, “to be an effective communicator in today’s world, a person needs to be able to interpret, create and select images to convey a range of meanings” (Bamford, 2003, p.1). Yet, according to Kress’s (2000) research “the visual is just one example” and that “other modes of communication have become prominent and increasingly significant in public communication” (p.182).

The paper in hand endeavours to illustrate the importance of addressing literacies as multimodal, as well as demonstrating the multimodal design elements young children have already accumulated from their cultural and social outside-of-school lives. Semi-structured interview extracts were generated from six Year One and Two children (six to eight years of age). The children were randomly selected, interviewed and audio-taped. All children were from a class that did not have an explicit focus on multimodal design elements, thus the interviews serve to demonstrate the knowledges that these young children are likely to bring in their virtual school bag. The interview schedule focused on the children’s articulation of understandings of the visual, gestural and spatial design elements in a piece of 2D artwork they had completed sometime throughout the school year.

The objectives of the study were:

- To demonstrate how children utilise already accumulated multiple literacies, based on Cope and Kalantzis’ multimodal design elements, as a meaning-making system, through the unpacking of their ‘virtual school bags’.

- To document children's articulated understandings of visual, gestural and spatial design elements within their 2D artwork.

Children's artwork can enhance a foundation for multimodal representation

Marks that represent the world or capture reality from past experiences are significant components of the arts. "Our power to render the world in terms of images provides us with a conceptual understanding of how we operate in the world" (Wright, 2005, p.4), and thus allows children the opportunity to be liberated through expressing their thoughts and feelings as unique individuals. It is through this form of communication that children are given the opportunity to explore multimodal design elements. Such design elements can often be taken for granted by children and teachers alike, due to the many pre-established and habituated ways of seeing and viewing the world, but should nevertheless be considered very much apart of a variety of representation where all modes of meaning-making are treated as equally significant.

The New London Group (2000) and Kress (2000) consider that all meaning making, including signs and messages, are always multimodal and further state that our experience of the world comes to us through "the multiple modes of communication to which each of our senses [are] attuned" (Williamson, 2005, p.1). The senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, feel allow us to experience decidedly differentiated information within a semiotic world; senses which act in accordance with one another (Kress, 2000, p.184). As early as 1941, Nicolaides states that when making sense of the world around us, we make "a constant effort to encompass reality with all of [our] senses" (Nicolaides, 1941, p. 9). In addition to using these senses to experience the world, Wright and Reardon (1998), state that learning is a multifaceted process, where "drawing boundaries between thoughts, emotions and actions would only require us to construct unrealistic conceptual bridges to connect what should never have been separated"(p.1). In other words, just as our senses never operate in isolation, so it is that our thoughts, our feelings and the way we response are all interconnected; however, these uses of multimodality and of non-verbal symbolic expression are often suppressed in institutionalised education "due to the social and

cultural dominance of literal language and written modes of expression” (Wright & Reardon, 1998, p.1).



Research findings

The following section of this paper outlines extracts from four children interviewed for the purpose of this research and the implications of their responses.

JERRY: Felt the heat of the day.

Jerry, at six years 11 months, is considered by his teacher to be an extremely polite child and is referred to as being a bit of a ‘dreamer’ at times. He is considered an ‘at risk’ student, achieving low levels in written literacy and reading by his class teacher, and has admitted to enjoying drawing much more than writing. When asked to choose his favourite piece of artwork that he had completed, he chose a picture of an invention he had drawn. Although his teacher had previously restricted his drawing to only his invention, he managed to sketch a yellow sun above his robot.

Extract One:

Teacher: Now I noticed you drew the sun up there. Can you tell me why you put the sun up here? (pointing to sun)

Jerry: Because it was hot.

Teacher: Was it because it was hot when you were drawing your picture, or because you wanted your robot in the sun?

Jerry: Because it was hot when I drew him.

Jerry was able to capture his feelings while drawing his picture, feelings that could not have been consciously and solely expressed through the written mode of expression. Here, through elements of visual and spatial design, Jerry demonstrates how he was able to process his thoughts and feelings by actively making marks on paper, marks that represent his awareness of the world around him, such as the heat of the day. Bearne (2003) explains how children often think in a twenty-first century way, a multimodal way, so that when attempting to express themselves in a twentieth century request for “writing-dominated forms of narrative”, some children can only represent a portion of the full story carried within their minds (p.xix).

Some implications from the case of Jerry are:

- Children like Jerry who are considered ‘at risk’ in standardised school-based literacy practices, often seem to be able to convey meaning within other modes of communication.
- By the time Jerry commenced school, he was a competent and practised maker of signs in many semiotic modes, demonstrating uses of non-verbal symbolic expression through his artwork.
- Jerry knows how to use artwork as a meaning-making resource.



ELIZABETH: The representation of texture.

Elizabeth, 7 years 0 months, is regarded as one of the 'top' students within her class, a high achiever in both writing and reading. From all reports, her 'virtual school bag' appeared to match the school's expectations.

Extract Two:

Teacher: Which do you prefer, to draw or paint a picture or write stories to express yourself?

Elizabeth: I like drawing and painting better?

Teacher: Do you think that painting and drawing can tell a story, or not really?

Elizabeth: Yes, it does tell a story.

This example shows how a competent writer and reader would prefer to tell a story through her artwork. Today, young children have many forms of text available to them, such as print, image, sound and movement, all of which have changed the way they construct meaning, the way they read and the way they think (Styles & Bearne, 2003). Thwaites (1999, p.6) argues that literacy should not be seen as a style of language, but a style of thought, much the same way as "writing is not a language". Instead, Thwaites states that literacy should be seen as a way of giving some "permanence to a language we hear and speak by means of marks we can

see". These marks become associated with images and images therefore become meaning.

From an early age, children are encouraged to make marks as part of their development, as the "drawings of a developing child are symbolic in nature and form a part of a maturing ability to think symbolically" (Thwaites, 1999, p.6). There are similarities between the marks which bear alphabetical resemblance and those which we call 'child art' (Thwaites, 1999). Apperly et al (2004) and Bamford (2003) maintain that 'child art' is composed of symbols that children use as established meanings which are understood long before the written word. A child uses such symbols as signifiers or sensory impressions (Thwaites, 1999, p.7), arousing more than an isolated thought, thereby becoming a multiple system of communication in creating a semiotic representation.

Along with making marks on a page as signifiers, children use colour as a design element to represent symbolic meaning. Here Elizabeth uses the colours brown and black to represent the texture of her drawing of a robot, and again, this may have been overlooked or made invisible if the child was required to use only written text as a form of narrative.

Extract Three:

Teacher: Why did you use those particular colours? Was there any reason?
Elizabeth: Yes, because he is like a robot, and is made from metal. He is sort of the colour of metal.

Through the use of colour, Elizabeth demonstrates an element of visual meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) describe colour as being a semiotic mode and an 'available recourse' for design. Utilised as a resource for making signs, the use of colour is used as a signifier (the material) to carry the signifieds (meanings) of sign-makers (p.59). In this case, Elizabeth has chosen particular colours as signifiers to help establish and give greater clarity to her robot, in that he is composed of metal. And not just any metal. The texture of the metal has been made apparent through the use of the colours brown and black, thereby giving a depiction of coarseness, of roughness, instead of a cold smoothness that can often be associated with the word 'metal'.

Some implications from the case of Elizabeth are:

- A number of children enjoy painting or drawing much more than writing as a means to communicate ideas within their mind.
- Children consider drawing and painting as artistic literacy (see Wright, 2003, p.2) which can convey stories.
- Children use colour as a means of representation, whereby taking on the function of a mode to articulate meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001); meaning which may have been made invisible through written text form.



ANITA: a shade of Christmas.

Anita is considered by her teacher to be a very well adjusted child for her 6 years and 5 months of age. Competent in written work and oral reading, she radiates harmless mischief and fun, while possessing a carefree attitude towards her learning experiences within the classroom. This facet of Anita can often become lost during rigid writing exercises where her sometimes comical antics can be misconstrued as unruly behaviour.

It was during a particular drawing episode that Anita gave evidence of unpacking some of her outgoing personality, her charming sense of humour and creativity. Only minutes before her interview, Anita hurriedly sketched and coloured a drawing that she wanted to talk about. Throughout this discussion, Anita demonstrated layers of multi-communication skills, specifically symbolic meaning and visual and gestural design elements. In the following extract Anita talks to the interviewer about her 'happy' reindeer.

Extract Four:

Teacher: What is this a picture of Anita?

Anita: This is a picture of a reindeer.

Teacher: So why did you draw this reindeer?

Anita: Because I thought he might look nice.

Teacher: It wouldn't have something to do with Christmas would it?

Anita: Yeh!!!! Yes, because it's nearly Christmas!

Teacher: You have drawn your reindeer with a face and it looks like you have drawn a

belly button?

Anita: Yes...(lots of giggles)

Teacher: So why did you draw your reindeer with a face?

Anita: I drew it with a face because he is happy.....he is a happy reindeer.

Teacher: And what is this thing hanging out of his mouth?

Anita: (More giggles)....it's a TONGUE....

Teacher: Why did you draw a tongue hanging out of his mouth?

Anita: Because it might look funny....(giggle).

Teacher: And do you think it looks funny?

Anita: Yes....(giggle)....I am a funny bunny.

Teacher: And what did you want me to notice about your drawing first?

Anita: That it was funny....(giggle)....that it looked funny.

Teacher: Now I see you have used some different colours here.....you have used brown, green and red. Why did you use these colours?

Anita: Because reindeer colours have brown....and it's Christmas so, um, I used the green and the red in my drawing.

Anita has used the image of a reindeer as a symbolic representation, along with the colours green and red because “it’s Christmas”. Unable to verbally articulate why the colours green and red are used for the festive season, she nevertheless associates these colours with the concept of Christmas, along with her drawing of a reindeer, subsequently making meaning within her social world and cultural background. Richards and McKenna (2003, p.153) believe that “meaning, therefore, is not inherent in signs but derives from the way humans interpret those signs as they have experienced them directly or vicariously”.

Because we are a sign using community (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p.3), the ability to read symbols as representations has become part of our modern day culture, a culture which is never static but ever changing. Signs which take on various forms for the functions they have evolved to exemplify “are largely determined by the cultural forces at work within any society” (Unsworth, 2001, p.8), producing and reproducing cultural meanings and values (Thwaites, 1999). Furthermore, Pahl and Rowsell in their 2005 research of ‘Literacy Education’ and in particular their work titled ‘Children’s Texts Go to School’, acknowledge student literacy identities as an unnatural occurrence, having been formed through particular social and cultural experiences such as home life, play schemes or activity centres; with their everyday texts being the production of these experiences instead of the mistaken understanding that children acquire these attributes ‘naturally’ at birth.

Some implications from the case of Anita are:

- Meaning is based on the funds of knowledge of everyday experiences acquired through cultural and social backgrounds.
- Children’s artwork can capture their individual personalities.
- Through visual and gestural design elements children can use their artwork as a way of representing the world as they know it.
- If playful interactions are excluded from the official literacy curriculum, then children’s competence in a range of literacies cannot be adequately recognised or built upon (Nichols, 2004, p.107).



APRIL: The colour of culture.

April, is aged 7 years 7 months, is considered to be an 'at risk' student struggling with reading and written text, and has taken to watching others work instead of engaging with her own assigned tasks. She has admitted to enjoying artwork much more than writing and reading, with real 'dislike' for the latter, most probably because she finds it difficult. She appeared very outgoing and confident when recounting her artwork, and competent in oral communication. During the following example, it can be seen how April expresses creative ideas she could have used during an art experience, but was unable to do so at the time.

Extract Five:

Teacher: Okay... so you have drawn some hands.....why is that?

April: Umm....I don't know....we looked in this book in class and umm, it actually

had some great drawings and one had a drawing with hands....so one of the

ideas was to draw our hands and to, like, maybe, make up a story. We made

up a story in our handwriting book. We haven't actually published it yet.

We

had to make up a story of our hands and stuff.

Teacher: What was your story?

April: My story is about the Aborigines and how they use their hands and how they

had to use their hands for a lot of things.

Teacher: Oh really. Okay.

April: Yeah.

Teacher: So talking about the colours for a minute. The background is black....oh, it is

not painted...it is just the colour of the paper.....so why did you want the background black?

April: Not sure, our Teacher chose the colour....not sure.

Teacher: If you had a choice, would you use that colour or another colour?

April: Umm... I think I might use red, dark red, like your shirt.

Teacher: Is there a particular reason?

April: Um...I just reckon....Monica, she's an Aboriginal and she told us that they use to use colours like your shirt to paint with.

Teacher: Oh, so you have used this colour down the bottom here because

April: Because it's the colour of their culture.

This example indicates how children do have ideas of their own. Though told what colour to use for her painting, April admits she would use a different colour if she had the choice. This choice would in fact have complemented her drawing, making it, in her eyes, a more powerful picture of how she wanted to represent 'culture'.

Extract Six:

Teacher: So these are pictures of two suns?

April: Yeah.

Teacher: And what about the dots around the sun?

April: I thought it could make it look pretty.....that's all.

Teacher: Okay...maybe it was to make it look more like an Indigenous painting....but

you just put them there to make it look pretty?

April: I guess. Monica said they were two suns, but she wasn't quite sure either. but she used to listen to stories her auntie would tell her.... that the Aborigines used to make up and yeah....

Teacher: So she was actually teaching you...

April: Yeah.

Teacher: Did you find that interesting?

April: Well, yes, I did find it rather interesting at one point. The point was the
Aboriginals at our school put on a dance with the music
teacher.....(digressed
about an Indigenous school concert)

Teacher: What did you want the viewer to notice first about your drawing?

April: I wanted them to see the very Indigenous culture, like other cultures and
things....

April's case study provides substantiation to Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) research where they state "individuals have at their disposal a complex range of representational resources, never simply of one culture but of the many cultures in their lived experience; the many layers of their identity and the many dimensions of their being" (p.204). Through classroom learning experiences and her peers, April was exposed to another culture, an understanding of which she decided to capture within her painting. Her illustration of the two suns and her use of dots give evidence of how she was influenced by previously viewed traditional Indigenous artwork, even though she considered the dots to be there "just for show...to look nice". All in all, her artwork reveals how her construction of meaning is uniquely her own, demonstrating that paintings are never simply a matter of reproduction, and that no two paintings are ever the same.

In Wright's (2005, p.95) article she uses a quote by Morris and Tchudi in stating how "Each new voice that joins society offers a fresh way of looking at the world...." (22). April displays a fresh way of looking at the world by interpreting some aspects of one culture through the lens of another.

Some implications from the case of April are:

- Children come to school with previously formed ideas and opinions.
- Literacies are learnt not only from children's teachers but from their peers and other adults within the school context.

- Those children struggling with written texts are not illiterate, but can communicate effectively through other modes of meaning.
- Knowledge and literacies are culturally and socially constructed; and when acquired by children can offer new meanings and perspectives to the rest of the world.

A multimodal approach to literacy education

One of the main responsibilities of literacy education is to help prepare children to become full participants in public, community, and economic life (New London Group, 2000), that is, competent and self-reliant members of our contemporary society capable of drawing on and contributing to the community's full range of available resources. In view of this, the New London Group argue that "literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (p.9), and which are very much a part of our world.

The most useful component of the tool kit for all literacy educators may not be the mastery of a particular method, but rather a vision of the future of literacy, a picture of the texts and discourses, skills and knowledge that might be needed by our students as they enter new worlds of work and citizenship, traditional and popular culture, leisure and consumption, teaching and learning.

(Luke & Elkins, 1998:4)

Using 'multimodality' as the preferred approach to contemporary literacy education has been well documented (see New London Group, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Wright, 2003, 2005; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990, 2001). This is not to say that reading and writing are now insignificant; rather it means that they are to be seen "as partial bearers of meaning only" (Kress, 2003, p.35) with mode and choice of mode being significant issues in enabling the way communication can currently be presented (Kress, 2003, p.45). These modes of representation can be particularly useful when addressing inclusivity within the classroom, whereby giving children more choices with which to engage their collected literacies from home and

out-of-school experiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p.71). Children are bringing to school textual concepts known as multiliteracies. These multiliteracies are commonly known as textual practices that “go beyond the print medium” (Healy, 2000, p.1), with visual images becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment.

The adoption of pedagogical strategies involving multimodal design elements within the classroom would support these out-of-school textual practices, by giving children recognition for what they can do, instead of what they cannot. They would also help children “transform what they know into modes of representation that allow for a full range of human experience” with opportunities to focus and ultimately develop individual strengths in their preferred styles of representation (Kendrick & McKay, 2004, p.109).

Despite Education Queensland’s ‘Literate Futures’ (2000) and ‘New Basics’ (2000) literacy framework leaning towards multiliteracies strategies, there is a conspicuous absence of policy focusing on multimodal design elements. Moreover, emphasis is placed on examinations and assessments of written texts rather than personal expression and elements of design (Bearne, 2003, p.xix). Given the increasing importance of a literacy we can use in the twenty-first century, there is a need to question where it is being developed within the curriculum.

In conclusion

It has been well documented that children’s drawings can give educators insight into how young learners construct literacy from personal experiences, as well as revealing what sense they have made of the complex world both inside and outside of school (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Apperly, 2004; Wright, 2005). This research study has also recognised the importance of children’s drawings or artwork as a representational and communicative resource for the construction of text.

Analysis revealed that while all children interviewed for the purpose of discovering their verbal understanding of visual, spatial and gestural design elements were not able to fully articulate the reasons for such uses, it was obvious through the

examination of their artwork that these elements were undoubtedly part of their meaning-making mechanism. Their artwork reflected an understanding of multimodal design elements, namely, the use of colours within visual design; spatial awareness through the placing of various painted objects; and gestural design through the display of particular marks representing various forms of personality.

It was evident that a multimodal approach gave a greater opportunity for inclusivity within the classroom, changing what was once considered undetectable into noticeable acquisitions of literacy knowledges and experiences. For this reason, education should provide pedagogical strategies to enhance such learning abilities, taking into account language built on semiotic and non-verbal forms of expression.

It is recommended that further, more extensive research be considered in regard to the exploration of young children's understandings of multimodal design elements within their 2D artwork, as additional investigation has the potential to provide a greater perspective on the evolutionary character of literacy development for children. As well, benefits would enhance a deeper understanding of the way young learners see the world; provide a broader perception of the ideas they may convey through combined uses of textual modes; and address those literacy practices considered necessary for children to response well to an ever expanding multimedia and technological world.

Multimodality is an absolute fact of children's semiotic practices. It is what they do; it is how they understand meaning-making; and the complexities of that mode of production are not a problem for them. The problem lies in our current firmly established common sense about literacy and what it is. Only we can fix that problem.

(Kress, 1997; 137)

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